Clientelism and politicisation. The case of Corsica during the French Third Republic

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International Conference: "Political Communication on the Spot. Democratic Cultures and the Local in Europe 1870-1990", Cologne, April 4-6, 2013

Clientelism and Politicization:
The Case of Corsica during the French Third Republic (1870-1940)

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Politicization is a central issue in the political history of the French Third Republic. A large part of historians on this period have indeed focused on the ways in which the populations (the rural populations in particular) were integrated into national politics in the second half of the nineteenth century, and on the ways in which they assimilated the "republican model." Two major, closely connected phenomena have been highlighted in this regard: *(a)* the "descent of politics into the masses" (to borrow an expression of Maurice Agulhon), namely dissemination in the rural areas of national ideologies and political values, as well as voters' education in active citizenship (interest in public affairs, electoral participation, collective claims, etc.); and *(b)* the disappearance of the traditional ruling classes, called the "*notables*" in French, and more specifically, the waning influence of traditional authorities in the countryside (landowners, the nobility, and the clergy) to the benefit of the new political elites from the middle classes (small rural bourgeoisie, doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.), the majority of whom were already sold on the republican idea. Renewal of the political elite also signified a decline in the old practices of political patronage and clientelism on which the power of the former *notables* had been based, to the benefit of a more abstract political exchange based on opinions, beliefs, and mobilization in defense of collective interests.

This summarized statement is of course a drastic simplification of a rich and diversified historiography that has given rise to many controversies. Common to this historiography, however—and this is this point that I would especially like to underscore—beyond its diversity and controversies, is a conception of political modernization formulated, for instance, by Eugen Weber in his book *Peasants into Frenchmen*. The conception equates democratic politicization with a process of voters' involvement in national politics, learning

the standards of republican citizenship, and the assimilation of ideologies and political values disseminated by the national political movements, as well as with a process of emancipation from the political patronage and social, economic, and cultural dependence characteristic of traditional rural communities.

In this perspective, the continued power of *notables* and its related political exchanges (clientilist trade-offs, in particular) can only appear as the manifestation of, as stated by Eugen Weber, a primitive stage of political life. According to this view, where the earlier political power arrangements persisted (in the peripheral areas of the national territory: rural areas in the south of the France, the Alps region, or Corsica, for instance), they can only be regarded as an "archaic situation," in which the population involved was relegated to the margins of the national-integration and democratic-politicization process happening in the rest of France.

The research I have conducted on the political elite in Corsica under the Third Republic has led me to challenge this proposition, or at least to qualify it considerably. Indeed, my research has shown that the power of the *notables* and the existing clientelism actually served as channels to ingrain electoral democracy and the republican state in Corsica, that these were in fact the central mechanisms for politicizing the populations and achieving their adjustment to modern politics. In this paper, I will present the main points of my argument. *(a)* First, I will show that establishment of the Third Republic in Corsica did not in the least curtail the power of the former *notables*, but also that it brought with it the formation of new republican elites who, for purposes of competing with the former *notables* in the electoral market, actually adopted behavior patterns very similar to theirs, including clientelistic practices. Thus, "modern" forms of politics (open electoral competition, pluralism of parties and opinions, public management of the territory in collaboration with local elected representatives, etc.) were established without producing any deep changes in the forms of political ties between voters and their elected representatives (clientelism) and with no radical transformation in the characteristic forms of exercising power in Corsica (the power of *notables*). *(b)* As the second point of my argument, I will uphold the idea that the clientelistic ties established with the *notables*, old or new, did not in any way prevent the populations from adopting "modern" politics. On the contrary, it seems that in the case of

Corsica, it was indeed through clientelism and relationships with the *notables* that the populations became interested in voting, became involved in local political networks, endorsed lasting partisan identities, and assimilated "modern"-type political categories and values (ideologies, collective beliefs, etc.). In short, it seems that it was precisely through clientelism that these populations were politicized.

[1]

As I have explained, the dominant political figure in Corsica during the Third Republic was the *notable*. Many of Corsica's parliamentary representatives throughout this period came from old influential families. This was the case, for instance, of the Gavini family, originally prominent landowners in the north of Corsica, whose first representatives held public offices ("Podestà," magistrate, or member of a local assembly) at the end of the *ancien régime* and during the administration of the constitutional monarchies of the first half of the nineteenth century. As shown in the simplified family tree of the Gavini family, elective offices were passed down within the family almost continuously. Denis, born in 1820, served in the administration of the Second Empire (he was state councilor then prefect between 1852 and 1870), then became a parliamentary representative of Corsica at the beginning of the Third Republic. His nephew Antoine, a lawyer in Bastia, succeeded him in this position, which he held for 35 years, from 1889 to 1924, before "passing it on" to one of his sister's sons, François Pietri, also a senior civil servant (general auditor, then ambassador). All of these "Gavinist Party" leaders, as well as other members of the family (notably their brothers) held local political offices.

Where did these *notables* draw their political authority? *(a)* First, in their social prestige, connected with their wealth, with their influence on the local administration and on state institutions, and with their family's reputation (the political capital of the family is evident in the family's genealogical tree: family members managed it collectively and it could be passed on inside the family group). This is how many historians have defined the notion of *notable*: for example André-Jean Tudesq (author of a famous book on the major *notables* of France in the mid-nineteenth century) stressed the "close relationship" (the conjunction)

between economic, political, and social power (while Paul Veyne, in the very different context of ancient Greece and Rome spoke of "aggregation of superiorities" in reference to the dignitaries of these societies). *(b)* The power of the *notables*, however, did not only come from the population's passive recognition of their somehow "natural" supremacy. It also followed from the active involvement of these *notables* in activities that generated and maintained the loyalty and allegiance of their voters.

Clientelistic trade-offs were crucial to these processes. By offering services and favors to voters, *notables* confirmed their authority doubly: first they made their supporters dependent on them for access to critical resources (jobs, charity, and various types of assistance); then they strengthened their prestige and legitimacy by acting in accordance with the moral duties related to their role. In other words, borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu, they increased their "symbolic capital" by founding their domination on moral obligations, which in turn provided them with the recognition and gratitude of their "clients."

As long as farming activities remained predominant in Corsica (that is, until the end of the nineteenth century), the clientelistic resources distributed by *notables* were primarily related to land ownership. Economic management of the properties was closely associated with the management of the family's political capital, as explained for example by the leader of a local party to a journalist investigating politics in Corsica in the mid-1880s. Part of the family lands were leased to tenants under "fairly mild conditions," and "rigorous" payment of rent was not always required; free grazing of herds on the properties was "tolerated," as well as wood gathering or hunting (but, as stated by the same *notable*, only their "friends" were allowed this tolerance). *Notables* also granted individual assistance (monetary loans or charity, for instance) or collective assistance (small pubic facilities such as fountains, communal wash houses, or road construction, for instance). They interceded with the public authorities on behalf of their "clients" in case of trial, land or commercial dispute, etc. In return, they received from their clients, in the terms of the above-mentioned testimony, "complete devotion." "I give my life and, so to speak, my fortune to our clients, and our clients give us their vote. "This is our secret," said the *notable* in question. "In the past," he added, "they would have followed us to war; today they follow us to the elections" (Paul Bourde, *En Corse*, Paris, Calman-Lévy, 1887, p. 81).

Notwithstanding, clientelistic resources were rapidly diversified. With the development of state presence on Corsican territory, the value of land-related resources would gradually depreciate. First, because public resources would grow and become central in clientelistic trade-offs in the form of administrative jobs, state welfare, or public subsidies—where many of these resources were distributed directly or indirectly by local elected representatives. Then, because emigration became the main means to achieve social mobility for the inhabitants of a region affected by a farming crisis and very poorly industrialized. Clientelism was thus increasingly a way to leave Corsica, in particular through the allocation of positions in the colonial administration (20% of which, around 1920, were held by Corsicans, whose total number of 280,000 amounted to only 1% of the total French population), in public or state enterprises on the mainland (particularly in Marseilles, where in 1911 nearly 7,000 families were from Corsica, or around 25,000 persons).

Thus, the distribution of "administrative resources" became decisive in accessing political positions, and in maintaining them. Some of the former *notables* adapted to the new situation; and this was the case of the Gavini family. Under the direction of brothers Antoine and Sébastien, they organized in Corsica a "political machine" including municipal officials, election officials, small village community leaders, etc., which allowed them to expand their electorate base and to preserve their influence in local institutions. They became part of the national political-power spheres (parties, parliamentary groups, senior civil service, or government elites), as attested to by the career of François Pietri, who was a senior official of the colonial administration in Morocco in the 1920s, then in the 1930s, minister several times. New elites who were foreign to the world of the big *notables*, however, were also able to access the distribution channels of "administrative resources." This was the case of the new republican politicians, who were from the small and middle bourgeoisie, often university-educated (they were products of the republican "meritocracy"), who were competing with former *notables* by also using clientelism. The political career of Emmanuel Arène, a parliamentary from Corsica from 1881 to his death in 1908, is a good example. Son of a merchant of Ajaccio (the regional capital), he studied law in Paris at the end of the Second Empire, was actively involved in the republican circles (he was close to Léon Gambetta), and was private secretary to the Minister of the Interior in 1879. He was sent to

Corsica to establish the "Republican Party" there, a task he accomplished successfully thanks to support from the local administrative authorities and to his role as mediator with the central power, which allowed him to distribute many “favors” to the voters and local elected officials attached to him (public employment, road construction, railway construction, grants, etc.). His successor as leader of the Republican Party, Adolphe Landry, was the son of a senior magistrate (district attorney in Corsica, then in Paris); he simultaneously led an academic career (he was a rather famous professor of economic demography in the *Collège de France* in Paris) and a political one (mayor and councilor in Corsica, member of parliament between 1910 and 1940, Vice President of Parliament, and minister several times between the two world wars). Here again, his access to the “administrative resources” offered to him by his closeness to the state, a leading position in a national party, a parliamentary and ministerial career, or more generally speaking by his being part of the circles of power (government and freemasonry), was crucial to building local leadership and to respond to voters’ demands, to the requests of local elected representatives, and in this way, maintain the ties of loyalty and interest that materialized the existence of the Republican Party at the grassroots level.

I cannot go into the details of the changes in politics in Corsica under the Third Republic. I would just like to emphasize two main points: *(a)* First, that establishment of the Republic did not do away with the former clientelistic practices. On the contrary, the new political class, which had played an active role in this establishment, but also the heirs of the old families of *notables* who managed to preserve their political positions, used their influence in the distribution channels of public resources to win voters and set up political alliance networks on the territory. *(b)* Then (and this is certainly the most important point), that these clientelist practices were adapted to political modernization, i.e. to the establishment of the institutions characteristic of “modern” politics: local public bureaucracies (the resources of which politicians sought to control and manage); political parties (formed largely on the basis of alliance networks powered by clientelist trade-offs); and open electoral competitions (among parties and groups competing for access to clientelist resources*). [Possibilité élargissement au cas de l’Italie du Sud : Gribaudi]*

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The second point of my argument will be shorter. I would like to show here that clientelism relations were part of the populations' politicization and their adjustment to modern politics, in their practical forms (voting or participating in public life), as well as in their symbolic forms (acquiring political knowledge, having and expressing opinions, and identifying with a political party). Three main points can be developed in this regard.

(a) Clientelism was first a powerful way to get rural populations interested in politics. It allowed politics to take root in the daily lives of the populations and provided them with a very concrete connection between politics and the social stakes and issues that mattered to them. Establishing a lasting political link with a *notable* and expressing one's loyalty and support by voting gave access to essential material resources: use of land and communal property for farmers and herders; opportunities for social mobility through administrative employment or emigration, or improvement of living conditions through the attribution of social allowances or public subsidies. Not only did this make voting tangibly significant for voters (leading them to become interested in electoral politics and to participate in them), but modern political institutions (governments and political parties) also penetrated local society through activities directly related to the daily lives of the populations. It would otherwise not be possible to understand the "passion" for politics that most observers (journalists, officials stationed on the island, and writers) attributed to Corsicans: the frequent acts of violence during election periods (going as far as assassinations), the festive events involving many voters (processions celebrating a victory, humiliation rituals for the losers, etc.), testified to the importance acquired by politics in the ordinary social life of the populations (at the same time, in fact, as to the politicization of traditional forms of local folklore).

(b) There is a second point that I would like to emphasize about relations between clientelism and politicization. Clientelist trade-offs did not preclude reference to abstract political values, beliefs, or ideological repertoires or partisan agendas. In their public statements, politicians frequently combined such references with statements of their ability to meet their voters' clientelist demands. Here is an example of fairly limited scope, but

quite significant from my point of view: that of a candidate's speech in the local elections of 1928 (he was the son-in-law of Adolphe Landry, who would be elected Deputy of Corsica in 1932), which was summed up by a prefecture official in these words: "After having given his thanks, Mr. Campinchi [the candidate's name] stated the meaning of his candidacy, arguing that he had answered the call of his many political friends, and that he proposed to put at the service of his future constituents the benefit of all his relations by ensuring his complete devotion to them." He then glorified the republic and its government, and said, speaking of Napoleon, that he was the most republican of the emperors of his time. His commitment to use his "relations" to provide "services" was closely linked to his expression of political affiliation (to the "Republic") and, at least implicitly, to the values it embodied. This is a very minor example and may seem something of a caricature silly; but it shows that the candidate needed to assert an ideological and partisan brand and signify his espousal of general political values. Beyond this example, we may assume that the provision of clientelistic goods and services can be associated with the normative learning of political values and ideals and that it could be an instrument of political "pedagogy," according to logics close to those of the "democratic clientelism" studied by Maurice Agulhon in Provence in the mid-nineteenth century. *[Phénomène qui a été décrit aussi dans des contexts très différents ; par exemple celui des banlieues communistes autour de Paris, par Padioleau]*

(c) This brings me to my third and last point regarding the way in which clientelism participated in the politicization of the populations. Clientelist trade-offs were not limited to bargaining (votes against favors and services). In rural communities in particular, they established solidarity links between a local political "boss" and the members of his electorate and, within the electorate, a shared sense of belonging to the same group, the same village "party." This "party" brought together, in most cases, individuals already gathered by family or neighborhood ties or by being part of the same social or cooperation networks (brotherhoods, companionship famers' associations, professional networks, Masonic lodges, and so on). A broad range of social relations were thus expressed through a common political identity, which became an essential "identity marker" for individuals and contributed to making of their political (partisan) affiliation an essential dimension of their social identity.

Here, rapidly presented, are the three main elements that have allowed me to conclude that clientelism, far from being an obstacle to democratic politicization, could have been be one of its instruments. On the one hand, it contributed to interesting people in political activities by linking these activities to the concrete issues of their daily lives; on the other hand, it was part of the political education of these populations by familiarizing them with ideological categories and national political labels, and by leading them to reformulate, under the terms of a shared political identity, a set of social relationships in which they were already involved.

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This conclusion contradicts the usual way in which most historians and social scientists consider clientelism. They have presented it either as a political archaism and an obstacle to democratic politicization, or, when it has been found in modern political institutions, as a dysfunction in these institutions, a misuse of their legitimate objectives. Instead of this marked opposition, in this paper I have tried to stress hybridization, the possible links between legitimate forms of modern politics (civicness, democratic citizenship) and the material trade-offs that can be brought about through use of democratic politics (clientelism). This conception leads to reviewing the notion of politicization by conceiving it as the process through which some populations take concrete ownership of democratic politics, depending on the stakes and interests of their material existence—rather than to just an acculturation to the categories and legitimate values of democratic politics.

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(Février 2013)